



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

# News Release

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## **PAST CATCHES UP WITH MAN LINKED TO CANADIAN BANK HEISTS**

*Los Angeles liquor store and restaurant owner deported to African nation of Eritrea*

LOS ANGELES — U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced today that a local businessman convicted of robbing two Canadian banks in the mid-1970s, ostensibly to raise funds for an insurgent group fighting for Eritrea's independence, has been repatriated to his adopted country.

ICE officials confirmed that Berhe Mahrai, 56, was removed to Eritrea this week on board a commercial flight escorted by ICE officers.

Mahrai was arrested by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers at Los Angeles International Airport February 17 after a routine computer background check revealed he was the subject of an ICE lookout. Canadian authorities advised ICE that Mahrai may have once been a member of the Eritrean Liberation Front. Mahrai told an immigration judge in April that he would accept deportation to his adopted country of Eritrea.

"This is another example of how enhanced security at our nation's ports and increased international cooperation are enabling us to intercept criminals and others who have previously eluded detection," said John Salter, Chief Counsel for ICE in Los Angeles. "The lesson in this is that those who fail to reveal their true past can expect to experience the full weight of the law."

ICE agents conducting the follow-up investigation on Mahrai subsequently determined that he was wanted on an outstanding local warrant for assault with a deadly weapon. ICE agents turned Mahrai over to the U.S. Marshals Service and he was convicted on the charges in July. After serving a portion of his sentence, Mahrai was returned to ICE custody last month for removal.

Mahrai, who operated two liquor stores and an Ethiopian restaurant in Los Angeles, originally came to the United States in the early 1970s. Shortly after arriving, he married an American woman and settled in Detroit. Then, in 1974, Mahrai and another Ethiopian national traveled to Canada where they robbed a bank in Toronto and one in London, Ontario. Mahrai was convicted of both crimes and sentenced to four years in prison. At about the same time, Mahrai's U.S. citizen wife divorced him.

After serving his prison sentence, Canadian authorities deported Mahrai to Ethiopia in 1976. ICE investigators believe Mahrai returned to the United States sometime in the early 1980s. Several years ago, Mahrai applied for U.S. citizenship, but U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services denied his application in 2002 because of his criminal history and referred the case to ICE.